



Old-fashioned holiday violence

CHARLES PINNING

Lying in bed I heard the muffled rumbling of tires and knew it was snowing. I hoped that it wouldn't stop and fell asleep.

In the morning, Newport was under a foot of snow and it was still coming down. I grabbed my sled and hit Robinson Street. I was forbidden to sled down Robinson without someone posted to look out for cars, but I was there first and it was perfect, irresistible cake.

Throwing myself on top of the sled I flew down the hill, squinting to see ahead. At the bottom I sped all the way across my street, over the sidewalk until I banged up against the Parker's fence. I ran back up the hill and did it again. The third time as I began to shoot across the street, a huge city snowplow had to slam on the brakes to avoid crushing me.

I was so scared I went straight home. Putting my sled on the porch the front door opened. "Get in here!" barked my father. "Mr. Parker just called and said you were almost killed by a snowplow sledding down Robinson. What did I tell you about doing that without somebody looking out?"

I was grounded for the rest of the day, watching from the living room window as the snow kept coming down and other kids played outside.

That night, bored and resentful, I shot a rubber band up against the back of the newspaper my father was reading.

"Please don't do that," he said.

I did it again.

"If you do that one more time, I'll spank you."

I did it again and he jumped up and pulled off his belt and I made for the lavatory, throwing the lock behind me.

"Open up!" he raged.

"Are you going to spank me?"

"Open the door!"

"But are you going to spank me?" I asked, trembling.

He threw his shoulder against the door, ripping it off the frame. I tried to squeeze myself behind the toilet bowl and got everything in except my fanny, which he whaled at with the belt while my mother screamed from the end of the hall, "Stop! It's Christmas Eve! Stop! Stop it!"

Later, alone in my room, I decided to run away.

We were in the middle of a blizzard and the snow was already up to my thighs and drifting much higher. I trudged for an hour into Middletown, winding down the hill to Green End Pond.

I short-cut over the pond to my grandparent's farm. The snow was waist-high and I was halfway across when I heard a long, other-worldly creak shoot out beneath the snow. I stopped and looked across to the farmhouse, white and barely visible. The sides of the barn and silo were flocked with snow. There were no lights on anywhere. I leaned against the snow, half swimming through it, to take the weight off my feet. I did not want to drown, savory as it was to imagine my father's lifelong remorse.

After the crossing, I made my way by the farm house and around to the barn. It was dark inside but warm with the bodies of the cows.

Exhausted, I lay down on the pile of sweet grain in the silo and fell asleep.

I awoke when Voo, my grandfather, stood over me holding a kerosene lamp. A Portuguese immigrant from the Azores, he spoke broken English.

"What you do here?" he asked softly.

I told him that my father had whipped me with his belt and I'd run away. He pulled me up with one of his thick farmer hands and brought me along while he began milking the cows. He asked me if I wanted to try. I sat down on the stool. He put the empty bucket beneath the cow and took my hands in his.

By the second cow I began to actually squirt some milk out by myself, but he had to take over because the cows were lowing and anxious to be emptied. They had to be milked twice every 24 hours. I wandered to the back of the barn and stared at the bull with the ring through his nose standing behind bars. I could feel his breath.

By the time the cows were finished being milked, it had stopped snowing. It was going to be a sunny day. We went inside the farmhouse where my Nana was at the stove. I told her about the whipping. Her eyes teared and she hugged me. My mother's younger sister, home from college, said, "Your father is out of control. He could traumatize you."

My grandfather pondered the word "traumatize." We all remembered when he learned the word "suspicious" from a temporary worker he'd hired to help put in the hay. We were sitting at Sunday dinner at the farm, my father and mother and aunts and uncles were arguing, and suddenly my grandfather, who spoke up so rarely announced, "You people are too suspicious!"

The shock of my grandfather uttering such a sophisticated word silenced the table, and nobody knew what they were arguing about anymore.

When he'd finished his breakfast, Voo put his red plaid hat back on and boots and coat and went out the back door. Soon we heard the loud rupp-rudd-rudd of the tractor and he came back in. "Get you coat," he told me.

In the brilliant blue and white morning, Voo hoisted me up onto the big, red tractor and we churned down the lane. There was no stopping the tractor's enormous rear wheels and I waved to early risers shoveling their driveways, digging through drifts 10 feet tall. Everyone smiled at the site of a farm tractor plowing down residential streets.

When we pulled up to the house, my father burst out of the front door. He seemed to be a smaller, thinner version of himself. He was a worried man. Voo swung me down. My mother came running out of the house and they hugged me and wanted to know what had happened. Voo looked at my father.

"You should no hit the boy," said Voo. Then he finished the job: "You could traumatize him."

Easing the tractor into gear he headed back up the street, back to feed the cows, leaving behind a stunned mother, a humiliated father, and a proud grandson who never again received such a vicious a beating.

Charles Pinning is a Providence-based writer and photographer.